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PETUNIAS. PAINTED BY HOWARD LOGAN HILDEBRANDT

## Modern Flower-Painting

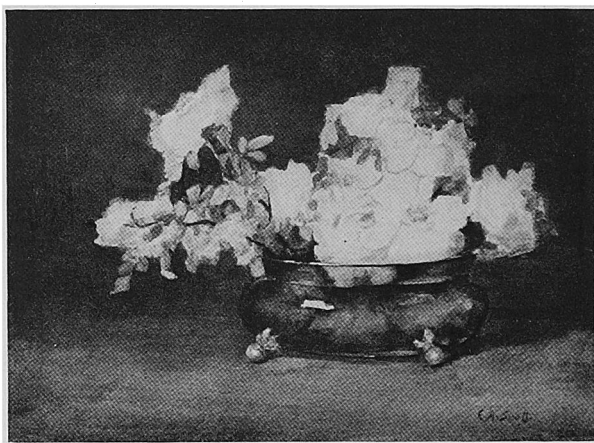
BY IDA J. BURGESS

**S**OMEONE has said that we should know very few signs or expressions of happiness did we not know the flowers. This truth has not been overlooked by artists. Today it is well regarded, as we find it attested in the revival of flower-painting at the moment. In the representation of flowers, all the great painters of earlier days found subjects worthy their attention and careful study, as the flower-pieces of the old masters in our art museums clearly show. There were even painters who gave their energies exclusively to the painstaking representation of flowers and objects of still-life, spending days and months in the endeavor to preserve the fragile beauty of Flora's treasures in all the perfection of exquisite detail and color. To these artists succeeded those painters of the classic revival to whom only human subjects were considered as motives deserving an artist's thought.

Then came what might be called the era of the "Hunt," bringing with it the series of sporting pictures and of scenes of country life, later followed by the products of the then newly invented process of lithography. With the development of chromo-lithography, flower-painting suffered tremendously except at the hands of aspiring amateurs who, although they could not hope to rival the masters, "copied" in oil or in watercolor the delectable subjects of the chromo-lithographer for the edification of admiring friends. The chromo-lithographer did much to encourage

Victorian "china-decorating," a pursuit in which every young lady of the day tried her hand, painting on the family dinner service, pansies, daisies or more ambitious roses with the utmost realism she could master. All these things, strange as it may seem, relegated professional flower-painting to the background. The later professional painters usually disdained to give their attention to the painting of flowers, or if they did so, it was with apologies, probably not wishing to be placed by a public which knew nothing about art in the "pansy-painter" class. But the power of the flower, marvel of grace and subtle beauty, reasserted its appeal to the artists' imagination and when such masters as the late William M. Chase and J. Alden Weir appeared in our annual exhibitions with large paintings of peonies, chrysanthemums and roses, protesting to their colleagues that these subjects deserved to appear on the exhibition walls quite as much as portraits and landscapes, the art of flower-painting may be said definitely to have resumed its prestige. Once the fashion was set by these artists of prominence, other artists lent encouragement to this revival in America.

With the flower-painter of earlier centuries the perfect delineation in all the detail of realistic representation was the task to which he directed his skill. He gave himself completely to this one ideal. Usually we find him painting great bouquets and vases of flowers, not of a single sort, but repre-

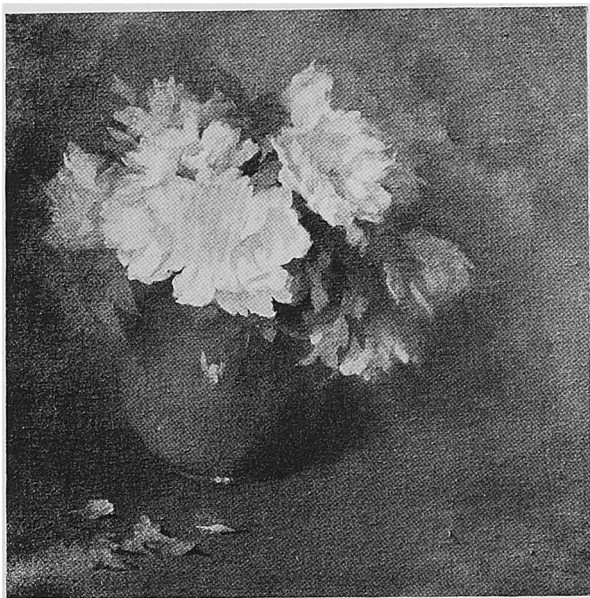


Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

YELLOW ROSES. BY EMILY M. SCOTT

senting a gathering of much the garden afforded. All sort of still life accessories were added. This was the day of formality in most things, and not until the impressionists of a later century conceived the idea of painting in the open air did the flower-painter seek the open fields where growing flowers show their full glory of color under the rays of the sun.

In contrast to the formality of the early indoor bouquet, we find quite as interesting the flower arrangements given us by those who seek their flower-subjects in the sunshine of outdoors. Here are nature's beautiful blossoms found in great masses on the hills, bending to the summer wind, or in those the formal masses of the protected garden, so deftly arranged for contrast of color. Indeed the garden under the glowing sunlight offers an endless number of themes for the brush of the flower-painter. The combination of flower and landscape is not unusual, but it is only recently that in such pictures predominance has been planned for the flower part of a picture. In the recent Winter Exhibition of the National Academy of design was shown such an especially pleasing arrangement in Dorothea Litzinger Thompson's *Mountain Laurel*. Certain modern flower-painting, too, seeks arrangements that suggest the salient features of the various species in color and form but do not portray



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

PEONIES. A FLOWER STUDY BY WILTON LOCKWOOD

the more individual flower portraiture found in the realistic lining of each separate flower. Painters of such flower-pieces seek to render the spiritual significance of flower groups rather than the units composing them. To the responsive color-sense the definite choice in a varying interlaced mass of closely allied colors in the arrangement of flower subjects is far more appealing than the other method of employing colors having no relationship except that of contrast. The one is like ascending variations in music. With a few positive accents to the final chord of harmony, while the other leaves only the impression of the trumpet's blare, or of single notes to claim the attention.

For instance, if the artist selects flowers of contrasting color with white blossoms everywhere among them in distinct contrast to others of very deep color, the whole sharply defined against a very dark background, the effect on the color-sensitive brain is stimulating to a degree almost painful, so that one seeks again the soothing influence of delicate harmony existing between closely related tones of color, such as may be found in the deep glow of the purple foxglove the varying richness of whose shades of crim-



SPRING FLOWERS. BY GUSTAVE COURBET

This was painted in 1871 at the Prison of Sainte Pélagie, Paris, where Courbet was incarcerated in punishment for his part in the overthrow of the Vendôme Column by the Commune



STILL LIFE: ASTERS. BY GIFFORD BEAL

Courtesy of the Anderson Galleries

son and pale rose are accented with a few notes of clear and vivid light only.

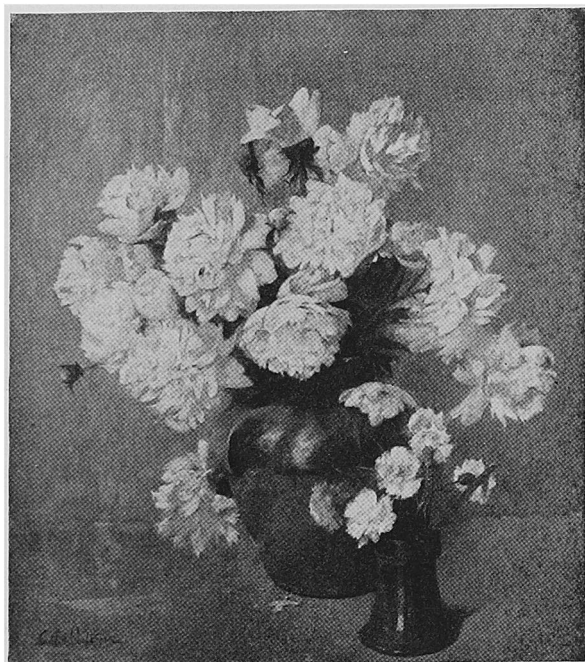
To some of our painters the fragile, almost transparent petal of the flower, with its perfume of quickly passing life, seems the quality above all else they would seek to embody in their portrayal of flowers. This was especially noticeable in paintings in water-colors by the late Mrs. E. A. Scott whose great success in this difficult medium early placed her work in a class by itself. The *Yellow Roses* from her brush, here reproduced, is to be found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The lifelike quality of glowing color together with remarkable form rendering in the utmost perfection of technique we find in the work of the painters Emile Carlson and Marin Mower. The heavier,

but possibly more brilliant color renderings of Gari Melchers, and the vigorous life expressed in the *Still Life* by Gifford Beal are bold and masculine expressions of plant life with the added delicacy of bending stems under the weight of heavy blossoms.

When the modern school of French painters definitely broke away from so called classic rules, the artist Courbet was among the first to give expression to his love for the delicate beauty of flowers. In a small canvas bearing the name, *Spring Flowers* and having the added note: *Painted at the prison of Sainte Pelagie, Paris; 1871*, we have one of many canvases on which he displayed his remarkable gift expressing the joy a prisoner might feel at the return of Spring. A mass of radiant color rather





Courtesy of the Ferargil Galleries

PEONIES AND CARNATIONS. BY EMIL CARLSEN

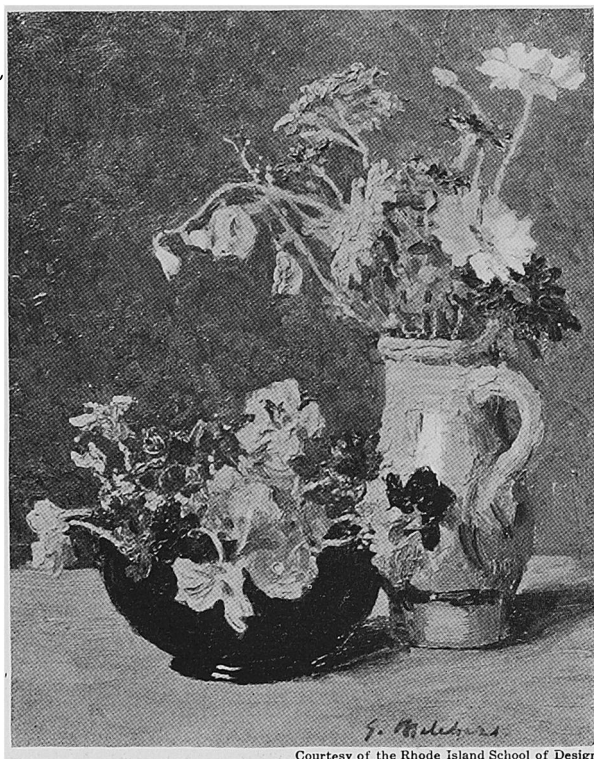
than the individual portrayal of each flower, this little canvas is full of tender color starred against gloom. Courbet's imprisonment followed his part in the throwing down of the Vendome column by the Paris Commune.

Whatever may have been the vicissitudes of flower painting, the depicting of Nature's living gems always persisted in some form. I think the *need* of flowers in art has kept them there and that the present day revival of flower painting is no more than the heart's appreciation of the fact that we have nothing fairer to look upon than lovely flowers, the pretty daughters of the earth and sun as Sir Walter Raleigh called them.

There is something, too, besides the mere beauty of floral life that attracts us. Flowers remind us through our spiritual sympathy with them of all that is refreshing. Was it not the Countess of Blessington who declared, "Flowers are the bright remembrances of youth; they waft us back, with their bland odorous breath, the joyous hours that only young life knows, ere we have learnt that this fair earth hides graves." As Henry Ward Beecher once wrote, "He

must have an artist's eye for color and form who can arrange a hundred flowers as tastefully, in any other way, as by strolling through a garden, and picking here one and there one, and adding them to the bouquet in the accidental order in which they chance to come. Thus we see every summer day the fair lady coming in from the breezy side hill with gorgeous colors and most witching effects. If only she could be changed to alabaster, was ever a finer show of flowers in so fine a vase?"

Modern flower painters are not merely following the traditions of the masters of early times, but they do, many of them, seek to present flowers free from the artificial (though still often very lovely) environment of vase accessory. Courbet was successful in this and our own later painters have also produced work that would seem to prove that the artist in selection of which, Beecher was, perhaps skeptical, has been able to select and to perpetuate in a manner deserving of nature's own commendation.



Courtesy of the Rhode Island School of Design

STILL LIFE. BY GARI MELCHERS